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The Role of Media Outreach and Program Modernization in the Growth of the SNAP Caseload

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- This study examines the effect of a multi-year advertising campaign and modernization policies on the caseload of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly the Food Stamp Program).

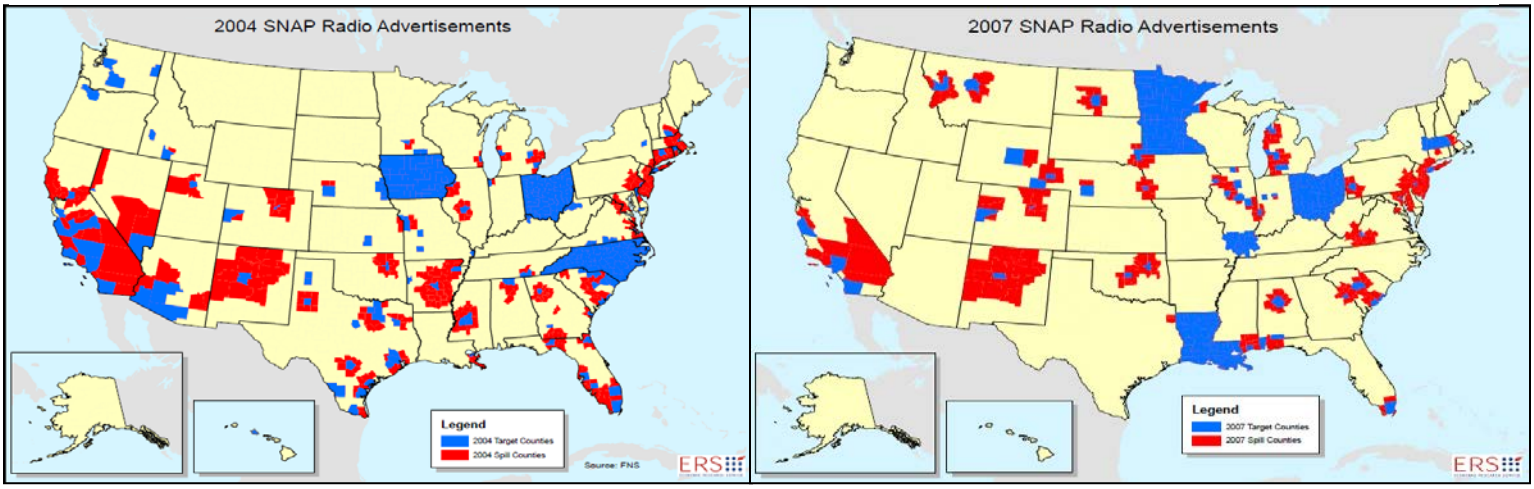
- **Background and Motivation**
  - SNAP is one of the primary transfer programs for low-income families in the United States.
    - Over 40 million Americans received SNAP in 2010.
    - Many eligible households do not receive SNAP benefits.
      - USDA estimates that 67 percent of eligible individuals participated in the program in 2008.
      - Participation rates among eligible individuals vary dramatically over time and across states.

  - The U.S. Department of Agriculture has created new initiatives aimed at increasing awareness of SNAP eligibility and modernizing program operations.

  - Important to understand the effect of these new initiatives
    - Is an advertising campaign an effective tool to increase SNAP participation?
    - Are the modernization efforts having the intended effect?

- **SNAP Advertising Campaign**
  - USDA-funded campaign started in 2004 to increase awareness of SNAP
    - Emphasize the potential eligibility of working households
    - Focus on the ability to purchase healthy food
    - Some ads targeted to the elderly, some aired in Spanish
    - Introduce the new program name

SNAP Radio Advertising Campaigns, 2004 and 2007



- **SNAP Modernization Efforts**
  - Online applications
    - Downloaded and sent to SNAP office
    - Fully completed online, with digital signature
  - Call Centers allow clients to interview for SNAP eligibility and recertification over the phone rather than in person.

- **Previous Literature**
  - Estimated effects of outreach on SNAP take-up are mixed.

  - Our work is most closely related to:
    - Aizer (2003, 2007): Medicaid outreach ads are associated with a 4 percent increase in enrollment in the following month
    - Heflin and Meuser (2009): modernization efforts are associated with reductions in the Florida SNAP caseload.

- **Methodology**
  - We estimate the following equation explaining the county-level monthly SNAP caseload from January 2000 to January 2010:

$$SNAP_{ct} = \alpha + \sum_{l=1}^{6} \beta_l Ad_Radio_{c(t-l)} + \sum_{l=1}^{6} \lambda_l Ad_STV_{c(t-l)} + MOD_{ct}\eta + FSP_{ct}\theta$$
$$+ \sum_{l=1}^{12} \phi_l Econ_{c(t-l)} + \varphi Demo_c * t + \sigma_c + \delta_m + \mu_s * t + \varepsilon_{ct}$$

    - where $SNAP_{ct}$ is the natural log of the per capita SNAP caseload in county c (c = 1 to 2855) at time t (t = 1 to 121),
    - Ad_Radio_{ct} (Ad_STV_{ct}) indicates that county c received a radio (Spanish-language TV) advertisement in time t,
    - MOD_{ct} is a matrix of policies related to the modernization of the SNAP application process (online applications, acceptance of e-signatures, and use of call centers),
    - FSP_{ct} is a matrix of controls for other SNAP policies,
    - $Econ_{ct}$ controls for the unemployment rate in county c at time t,
    - $Demo_c$ are year 2000 county demographic characteristics, interacted with the time trend t; σ_c are county fixed effects; δ_m (m = 2 to 12) are month-of-year dummy variables; and $\mu_s * t$ represents state-specific linear time trends (an alternative specification includes state-year fixed effects rather than linear time trends).

- **Regression Results: Primary Specification**

Coefficient estimates	(1)	(2)
Radio advertisements	0.026**	0.001**
Spanish TV advertisements	-0.075**	-0.087**
Online applications	-0.030**	-0.031**
Electronic signature	0.002	0.031**
Call Centers	-0.001	0.003**
Unemployment	0.051	0.034
Controls for time-varying state characteristics	State-linear time trends	State-year fixed effects

** Significant at 1%, *Significant at 5%

- **Endogeneity Issues**
  - The choice of counties in which to place advertisements could bias estimates
  - Our attempts to control for possible endogeneity
    - Control for pre-treatment county characteristics
    - Include leads of advertisting variables
    - Use more closely matched comparison group of border counties
  - Findings suggest an upward bias in the estimated effect of radio advertisting and an downward bias in the estimated effect of television advertising.

- **Summary of Findings**
  - Small, positive effects of radio ads
  - Large, negative effects of Spanish-language TV ads, which may be a result of the endogeneity of ad placement.
  - Online applications are negatively associated with the SNAP caseload, consistent with earlier research on the SNAP caseload in Florida
  - Little to no effect of call centers

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